Original Paper

An Investigation and Analysis of Student Participation in the Internal Governance of Chinese Universities

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Abstract

College students are an indispensable and important subject in the internal governance of universities. In order to understand the basic situation of student participation in current university governance, this study selected 158 students from more than 10 different types of universities in eastern, central, and western China as questionnaire survey subjects. The results show that college students in the new era have actively paid attention to and participated in the internal governance of universities, but there are problems such as students not understanding whether the university has set up a system for student participation in university internal governance, and the standardization, rationality, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness of rules and regulations are lacking; students are not highly satisfied with the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of participation content, and the participation content has not been highly advanced with the times; participation channels have not yet fully met student needs, and urgently need to be improved in terms of convenience and effectiveness; the construction of a supervision and guarantee mechanism for student participation in university internal governance is not widespread enough, and corresponding measures or mechanisms are not comprehensive enough. To this end, it should be improved from four aspects: strengthening the construction of rules and regulations system, optimizing participation content, improving participation channels, and strengthening supervision and guarantee.

Keywords

University, Internal Governance, College Student, China

1. Introduction

The report proposes to strengthen and innovate social governance, and "create a social governance pattern of co-construction, co-governance, and sharing." In this context, as an important organic part of

social governance, how higher education governance, guided by "co-construction, co-governance, and sharing," forms a governance pattern with Chinese characteristics that is jointly constructed, jointly governed, and jointly enjoyed by all parties involved in the development of higher education has become an important theoretical and practical issue in the development of higher education in the new era. And any construction and optimization of a "co-construction, co-governance, and sharing" governance system involving multiple subjects in universities without fully considering the participation of the largest subject, namely "students," is unimaginable.

Both at home and abroad, for a long time, the emphasis has been on the role of teachers rather than students in governance. For example, the professorial system in universities during the Republic of China period originated from the West (Wu, 2011). In addition, due to the profound influence of traditional social culture and educational concepts, this is especially true in Chinese universities. Until the 1990s, some scholars still insisted that "teachers are the essence and core of internal governance in universities" (Waugh, 1998). However, on the one hand, influenced by the changes in Western student governance thinking, the view that students are "parties" to higher education and occupy an important position in academic power and rights exercise (Brubacher, 1982) has gradually been accepted. On the other hand, with the increasing emphasis on multi-subject joint governance by the state since the new century and the advancement of reforms in higher education internal governance systems, more and more scholars believe that student power is one part of university power. The power of other interest groups composed of general teachers and students plays a role that cannot be underestimated in university power (Xie & Yan, 1998). However, even so, student participation in governance is still not an easy task. For example, one study pointed out that student power depends on its recognition and acceptance by its object and other subjects involved. The incompleteness of student subjectivity makes it difficult for its power to operate symmetrically with other powers in university governance structure (Sun & Wang, 2014). So, what is the current situation of student participation in university governance in China? What are the urgent problems that need to be solved? How can we better improve and enhance their participation level? To clarify these issues, our research group conducted a questionnaire survey and proposed corresponding countermeasures based on it.

2. Research Design and Sampling

This study was conducted using a questionnaire survey. In addition to the basic information of the survey subjects, the questionnaire is divided into five parts: the first is the overall situation, focusing on understanding the overall situation of college students' participation in governance; the second is four basic dimensions, including rules and regulations for student participation in governance, content of participation in governance, channels for participation in governance, and guarantee mechanisms for participation in governance, focusing on understanding the specific participation of college students from various levels and revealing problems from a systemic and institutional perspective. Among them, rules and regulations reflect the top-level design of student participation in governance; participation

80

content stipulates the rights and responsibilities of students participating in university internal governance; participation channels reflect how students participate in governance, that is, how to achieve governance; while guarantee mechanisms play a role in maintaining and motivating student participation in governance.

A total of 170 questionnaires were distributed and 158 valid questionnaires were collected, with a recovery rate of 92.9%. The distribution of survey samples is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Survey Samples

	Category	Numbers	Proportion
Gender	Male	47	29.8%
	Female	111	70.2%
Major	Philosophy and Social Sciences	102	64.6%
	Engineering	39	24.7%
	Science	13	8.2%
	Arts	4	2.5%

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overall Situation

This part of the survey reflects the overall understanding and actions of college students in participating in university governance. Understanding is a prerequisite for participation, while action reflects the true state of participation. The survey found that:

(1) Most students believe that it is necessary to participate in university governance. 98.7% of the samples believe that it is necessary for students to participate in discussions and decision-making on university affairs, while 1.3% of the samples believe that it is not necessary, because it does not conform to personal wishes and is not a necessary task during their studies.

(2) Most students believe that student cadres should participate more in governance, while ordinary students have a lower priority. Who should participate in governance, student cadres, student representatives, or ordinary students? The frequency of choices is university/college-level student union, graduate student union cadres (83.3%), student representatives (81.4%), and ordinary students (55.1%).

(3)The actual participation rate of students in university governance is not high. Students who always participate account for 12.3%, students who often participate account for 26.3%, students who occasionally participate account for 35.3%, and students who rarely participate or have never participated account for a total of 26.3%. In other words, less than 40% (38.5%) of students participate more in governance activities.

Students have a high satisfaction with their participation in governance. Students who are very satisfied,

relatively satisfied, and somewhat satisfied account for 10.9%, 44.2%, and 36.5%, respectively, totaling 91.6%. Students who are relatively dissatisfied and very dissatisfied account for only 7.7% and 0.6%, respectively.

The above data shows that college students' cognition and actual actions towards participating in governance are contradictory - they attach great importance to participating in governance in their thinking, but they are more willing to regard it as a matter for cadres and student representatives; they are not active in participating in governance, but they are satisfied with the participation situation. These contradictions reflect that college students have not truly comprehensively and deeply understood the importance of participating in governance; they regard participating in governance more as a right and ignore its obligation attribute. After enjoying the right (can participate) is satisfied, fulfilling the obligation (actual participation) becomes even more "troublesome". Therefore, college students attach importance to the right to participate in governance on the one hand, but on the other hand they do not care about the participation activities themselves.

3.2 Rules and Regulations

The significance of rules and regulations lies in two aspects: one is to empower students to participate in governance, making it a legitimate activity with clear and legitimate organizational forms and procedures, that is, having laws to follow; secondly, it establishes the boundaries of rights and obligations from an institutional perspective, as Nwankw pointed out: "The formulated rules and regulations should include the rights, obligations, and action plans of all members. They can reduce troubles at work and avoid arbitrary answers to every question and situation" (Nwankw, 1982), so that students can follow rules when participating in university internal governance. Therefore, whether there are rules and regulations, whether the rules and regulations are complete or not, and whether the rules and regulations are effectively implemented are crucial for student participation in governance. The survey found that:

(1) Students' perception of relevant rules and regulations is low. As many as 54.5% of students are not clear whether their university has formulated rules and regulations for student participation in university governance; 12.8% of students clearly stated that their university has not issued corresponding rules and regulations; compared with this, only 32.7% of students confirmed that there are relevant rules and regulations.

(2) Most students affirm the rationality, completeness, and effectiveness of rules and regulations. Among students who clearly know that there are relevant systems in their universities, 78.3% have a positive attitude towards the rationality of rules and regulations; 70.6% have a positive attitude towards the completeness of rules and regulations; similarly, 70.6% believe that relevant rules and regulations can truly effectively protect student rights during participation in governance.

This part of the survey shows that most universities may not have formulated relevant systems for student participation in governance (the possibility is not high), or although they have formulated relevant systems, their perception level is very low (the possibility is very high). As the saying goes:

"Being one with the people without knowing the law is impossible." Rules and regulations that are not known by students obviously cannot play a role in protecting student participation in governance. On the contrary, those students who know about university rules and regulations have relatively high recognition levels for both system itself and system execution efficiency; this shows that rules and regulations play a prerequisite role for student participation in governance.

3.3 Participation Content

Participation content corresponds to questions such as "what to participate in" and "rights and responsibilities during participation" in student participation in university internal governance, that is, it regulates the types, levels, and content of affairs that students can access in governance, and clarifies the specific rights and responsibilities that students need to undertake during participation. Participation content provides a boundary for student participation in university internal governance, helping students to clarify the scope of governance affairs available for their participation, and making it easier for students to match rights and responsibilities when participating in university internal governance.

(1) Most students participate in governance activities that are directly related to themselves. What exactly do students participate in the internal governance of the university? The survey results show that the actual governance activities participated by students (multiple choices) are: applying to organize and participate in student clubs and student activities (76.3%); using teaching facilities and public resources, proposing educational and teaching needs and suggestions (69.9%); participating in and supervising the evaluation of student scholarships, grants, honors, etc., obtaining opportunities for further study and academic exchange activities (69.2%); involving their own interests in various university matters and the formulation of rules and regulations related to students (59.6%); participating in supervising university logistics matters such as canteen hygiene, dormitory management, water and electricity services, environmental hygiene, book purchases, etc. (57.1%); appealing against disciplinary actions and relevant decisions involving rights and interests (52.6%).

(2) About half of the students do not fully recognize the comprehensiveness of participation content and the degree to which governance content keeps pace with the times. Only 45.5% believe that the content of participation in governance is very comprehensive or relatively comprehensive; only 50.0% believe that the content of participation in governance can fully or relatively keep pace with the times.

(3) More than half of the students do not have high hopes that their participation in governance activities will have an impact on the corresponding decisions of the university. Only about 46.8% of students strongly or somewhat agree that their participation in governance activities can have varying degrees of impact on the corresponding decisions of the university, but the remaining 53.2% of students believe to varying degrees that these participation activities are not enough to have an impact on the decision-making of corresponding university affairs.

"In general, the public only pays attention to and is responsible for public affairs related to their own interests" (Wang & Zhang, 2021). It is understandable that students are more concerned about things that are directly related to their own interests, but this does not mean that the content of student

governance should only stay in the part directly related to them. "According to the relevance of interests and the possibility of decision-making, the content of student participation in governance can be divided into five categories: strategy, management affairs, personnel, curriculum teaching, and student affairs" (Tang & Fu, 2009). As the largest group in universities and the direct object of education, they should have moderate but comprehensive participation in university governance. Taking the United States as an example, in 50.3% of public universities, there is at least one student trustee with voting rights; in another 28.2% of public universities, there is at least one student trustee without voting rights (Guan, 2022). These student trustees not only participate in matters directly related to students themselves, but also participate in more significant university affairs in the board of directors. In addition, the above data also shows that students are not satisfied with their participation in governance and do not have high expectations for whether they can influence decision-making. This also indirectly indicates that students expect their participation in governance to be richer and more comprehensive and better play a practical role.

3.4 Governance Channels

Participation channels are related to the implementation of student participation in university internal governance. Only when channels truly exist and are unobstructed can students truly and effectively participate in governance. The survey shows:

(1) The channels for participation in governance have not fully met student needs. The survey shows that although 78.2% of students said that their universities provided channels for participation in governance. However, recognition of channel richness, convenience, and effectiveness is not high, with a combined proportion of those who somewhat or fully agree accounting for 48.4%, 45.9%, and 51.6%, respectively, accounting for only about half of the survey sample.

(2) The Internet has become the main channel for students to participate in governance. 36.5% of students participate in governance through university websites, forums, blogs, WeChat, and other online platforms; 27.6% participate through channels such as symposiums, hearings, principal mailboxes, or public opinion surveys; 26.9% participate through management agencies or student organizations; another 9.0% participate through complaint or appeal channels such as complaints or appeals, reporting and accusing, letters and visits.

(3) College students hope to maintain diversified governance channels. Although college students use the Internet more often to participate in governance in practice, 64.1% hope that online and offline governance channels can be organically combined, while only 19.9% hope to use traditional channels alone and only 16.0% hope to use online channels alone.

The above data shows that traditional channels are still one of the mainstream channels for current student participation in university internal governance, but emerging online channels have gradually expanded their scope of use in recent years in the process of student participation in university internal governance. In order to better open governance channels, universities should pay attention to the construction of both online and offline channels. Traditional channels should be combined with

84

emerging online channels to provide more choices and convenience so that students can more easily express their opinions and suggestions.

3.5 Guarantee Mechanism

Whether college students' participation in governance can be adequately guaranteed has a great impact on their enthusiasm for participating in university internal governance and their willingness to continue participating. Therefore, supervision and guarantee of participation is a very critical link in the entire process of student participation in university internal governance. The survey found:

(1) The supervision and guarantee mechanism for student participation in governance is not sufficient. 52.6% of students' universities have set up guarantee measures or mechanisms for student participation in university internal governance, but there are still 47.4% who believe that their universities do not provide corresponding measures or mechanisms to guarantee students' rights to participate.

(2) The existing guarantee measures and mechanisms are unbalanced. Satisfaction with measures for soliciting opinions from universities is high; satisfaction with construction of supervision and complaint channels, support for student participation, information disclosure and other aspects is average; while satisfaction with providing guidance on governance is low (see Table 2).

Table 2. Student Satisfaction with Guarantee Mechanisms

	Information Disclosure	Opinion Collection	Supervision or Complaint Channels	Providing Guidance	Supporting Student Participation
Satisfaction	59.76%	68.29%	64.63%	50%	63.41%

(3) College students are eager to solve the basic underlying guarantees. When asked about the guarantees they most hope to receive when participating, most students hope to receive timely feedback after participating, followed by having their right to speak fully respected during the participation process, and finally hoping to receive guidance and training before participating, with proportions of 50%, 36.5%, and 13.5%, respectively.

On the whole, the participatory guarantee systems for college students' participation in university governance in China is not yet perfect. There are still situations where some universities lack corresponding supervision and protection measures. Even in universities with corresponding measures, the basic protection is not very sound, and the protection measures need to be further strengthened.

4. Conclusions

In general, as the survey data shows, students have become important participants in Chinese university internal governance in practice, but their participation still needs improvement, which is manifested in: in terms of rules and regulations, the system is not sound; in terms of governance content, student participation is narrow; in terms of participation channels, it has not fully met student needs and

urgently needs to be improved in terms of convenience and effectiveness; in terms of guarantee mechanisms, the foundation of the guarantee mechanism for student participation in university internal governance is insufficient and corresponding measures are not comprehensive enough. And these problems may in turn lead to insufficient student participation awareness and low satisfaction. To this end, it is recommended to improve top-level design and work on the system, content, channels, and guarantees for student participation in governance.

(1) Strengthen the construction of rules and regulations system. On the one hand, it is necessary to strengthen the construction of rules and regulations system for student participation in university internal governance, so that various systems in the system can achieve comprehensive coverage, specific provisions, and reasonable standardization in terms of content, and efficient, effective, and universally binding implementation of systems. On the other hand, it is necessary to change the situation where students do not understand the system for participating in governance very well. This requires not only more effort from universities in publicity and communication with students, but also a change in students' own concepts while enhancing the effectiveness that participating in governance can bring to students. Universities can take advantage of opportunities such as freshman orientation education and regular student symposiums to strengthen communication with students and popularize relevant systems for student participation in university governance.

(2) Optimize participation content. Students' satisfaction with the comprehensiveness, effectiveness, and timeliness of participation content is not high enough and needs to be improved through research methods such as surveys to understand the reasons for student dissatisfaction and start targeted improvements. The key to improvement lies in carefully defining the boundaries of participation content based on student needs, ability to participate in corresponding governance affairs, time requirements, etc. For example, some scholars have combined university reality with "student interest relevance" and "student ability professionalism" two variables to define the limits of student participation in governance (Zhu & Song, 2015). In the future, more key variables can be included to further explore the boundaries of student participation content.

(3) Improve participation channels. First, traditional channels need to be further optimized and improved. For example, institutions or organizations and opinion expression channels that students prefer should further simplify processes, enrich forms, improve efficiency, and do a good job of popularizing science and propaganda. The key to using emerging channels is to vary according to the nature and content of affairs while paying attention to supervision and grasping the "degree" of use. For example, major affairs involving confidentiality or major decision-making are not suitable for emerging channels; for daily affairs participation can make full use of emerging channels. For online platforms preferred by students, universities also need to continuously update their scope for solving problems according to actual conditions; clearly divide corresponding sections; further improve feedback mechanisms; improve response efficiency; while continuing to explore new online feedback platforms using information technology.

(4) Strengthen supervision and guarantee. In the future, universities can further build a supervision and guarantee system for student participation in university internal governance from aspects such as student power view; legal rules; democratic management and supervision system; student organization construction; scope of student participation management (Wang, Li, & Fan, 2015). For example: through training or lectures help students understand that participating in governance is their right as a member of a university; break down prejudices such as "participating in governance is a waste of time" or "students do not need to participate in governance"; let students understand that participating in governance can not only help them improve their personal abilities quality; protect their legitimate rights and interests; realize their own value; but also help improve university management level and management effectiveness at university level; multiple benefits with one move. In addition: universities also need to show their support for students' participation in university governance through official platform information disclosure or orientation education; explain which channels are provided by universities for students' participation in governance; what systems are provided as guarantees for their participation through training or providing proposal templates; provide sufficient guidance for students; train students' ability to express problems in governance.

Fund Project

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